INTEROPERABILITY

In Thailand, Software Piracy's Still a Problem

Bangkok, Thailand—A couple years ago, I sat in a Bangkok copy shop near the notorious Patpong red-light district and watched a tourist walk in with his laptop.

"Fill 'er up," he said, exposing his RS-232 port for all to see. A cable, already in place on a big desktop system, was connected, and 40 megabytes of software started churning into the disk drive on his laptop.

In countries like Thailand, Hong Kong, India, and China, there is often no relationship between the suggested retail price of software and what you pay for it. Instead, you pay by the disk. Need a one-disk version of WordStar? Two dollars will take care of you. Need something fancier, like a 20-disk modern application? For $40, you can get the latest release of Ventura Publisher, SCO Unix, Autocad, or other big-ticket items.

Carl Malamud

Piracy has become a key negotiating item in U.S.-Thai trade relations, with the United States threatening formal actions if Thailand doesn't fix (and enforce) its laws. Software piracy is actually one of the low-priority items. Thailand has exempted pharmaceuticals from patent protection, and trademark laws are widely ignored, although not all the pirates get their rip-offs quite right. I remember once walking down Sukhumvit Road, where street vendors fill the sidewalks, and seeing a Gucci watch clone with a picture of Snoopy on the front dial.

Lack of copyright protection for software has had a big effect in Thailand. The local Windows distributor estimated that he was getting about 2 percent of the local market, the rest being unauthorized copies.

Piracy has turned into a chicken-and-egg issue in Thailand. Legal copies of software often sell for twice the U.S. list price in a country with a much lower standard of living. People who do buy the legal copies have trouble getting support, and almost never get updates or bug fixes. At the same time, vendors don't want to establish Thai-language versions of their software for fear of losing their investment.

The people who have the toughest time are the small consultants who make their living at systems integration. It is so easy to get a dealer to shove a bunch of software onto a system as a sales incentive that some users don't see why they should pay for custom solutions.

And systems integrators spend much of their effort trying to protect solutions they design from piracy. That means that users end up with kludges like hardware locks on their systems. Still, more and more end users are starting to see that support and training are the key issues in software, and the number of legit copies is growing rapidly.

Thailand has largely left behind the Wild West days of piracy, when you could go into stalls and peruse huge lists of software. Those shops still exist, but they are fewer.

Thailand seems to be going through the same stage the United States did in the early days of the PC, when software was widely pirated. Piracy is remarkably common in the United States still, but there is a big enough core of customers to support the software industry. Thailand is just beginning to develop that core. ■

CARL MALAMUD is writing Exploring the Internet: A Technical Travelogue, *a book that will be featured as The Interop Book at Interop '92 Fall. The opinions expressed are his own.*

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